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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 CAIRO 003807

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: THE FIRST LADY'S VISIT TO EGYPT

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1. (SBU) Embassy Cairo warmly welcomes the visit of First Lady Laura Bush to Egypt. This visit is an opportunity for the U.S. to emphasize for the Egyptian public and its leadership our concern over the essential societal issues of education and literacy. Egypt's first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, who has a well-earned prominent role in governmental and non-governmental organizations focused in these areas, will join Mrs. Bush for much of her program. The program will also include an opportunity to meet with some of Egypt's prominent women activists.

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Schedule highlights  
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2. (SBU) The First Lady's schedule will include events in both Cairo and Alexandria. Key components of the Cairo stop include a joint TV taping with Mrs. Mubarak of Egypt's Arabic-language version of Sesame Street (Alam Sim-sim), interviews with U.S. morning show hosts against the backdrop of the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids of Giza, a lunch hosted by Mrs. Mubarak for leading women on establishment NGOs, a visit to a "one room girls' school" designed to bring girls who have been denied educational opportunity back to school, an Embassy community "meet and greet," and an Embassy-hosted event with leading reform-oriented women. The First Lady's visit to Cairo, home to almost 20 million of Egypt's 72 million inhabitants, will receive wide coverage and provide her with a snapshot of educational and women's issues facing Egyptian society.

3. (SBU) The First Lady's second day will focus on Alexandria, Egypt's "second city" with its rich Mediterranean history. The First Lady will visit a secondary school and the Alexandria Library before departing Egypt.

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Suzanne Mubarak  
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3. (SBU) Suzanne Mubarak is an active and very public first lady. She will be a gracious hostess. Her many public appearances in support of charitable causes, including frequent overseas trips for international conferences, get prominent play in the Egyptian media and she wields considerable clout in domestic politics. This is particularly true when it comes to promoting education and literacy, issues also supported by President Mubarak.

4. (SBU) Mrs. Mubarak's primary areas of interest focus on girls' education, women's rights, literacy, social welfare, and health care. She is the head of the Egyptian Red Crescent Society (similar to the American Red Cross), the National Council for Women, and the National Council on Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), among myriad other titles. As the President's wife, she takes on high-profile causes. Recently, she took a lead role in getting the large, upper class suburb of Heliopolis (where she and President Mubarak live) spruced up for the neighborhood's 100th anniversary celebrations.

5. (SBU) With a particular emphasis on women's and children's issues, Mrs. Mubarak has attended the 1995 Women's conference in Beijing, headed the Egyptian delegation to a special UN session on Women in 2000, joined prominently in the 2001 Arab Women's summit, participated in the 1990 World Summit on Children, and has sponsored many literacy and education related programs in Egypt. She also has actively supported peace initiatives, to include humanitarian efforts in support of the Palestinians, including sponsoring caravans of basic food supplies during the height of the intifada.

6. (SBU) Mrs. Mubarak is Christian, while her husband is Muslim. She has two children: the single Gamal (in his early 40's) who is the head of the ruling National Democratic Party's Policies Committee and an older son, Alaa who focuses on business interests. Married (to former UNICEF official Heidi Rasekh), Alaa has not been involved in politics. His two sons are President Mubarak's only grandchildren.

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Cairo sites  
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17. (SBU) In Cairo, the First Lady will be greeted by Suzanne Mubarak at President Mubarak's official palace for a short courtesy call before proceeding to a joint taping of Egypt's Arabic language TV version of Sesame Street, "Alam Simsim." The program, which was launched with USAID support in 1997, is extremely popular in Egypt and is rebroadcast around the Arab world. One of the program's principle aims is to promote literacy. Mrs. Mubarak appeared on the program in 2003, reading a book to one of the puppet-like characters.

18. (SBU) After appearing on U.S. TV shows, Mrs. Bush will be hosted at the historic Mena House Hotel adjacent to the Pyramids. Egyptian Guests at the lunch will include female representatives of the boards of various non-Governmental organizations that Mrs. Mubarak has taken a leading role in promoting. After lunch Mrs. Mubarak will accompany The First Lady to the Abu Sir Girls' School. This school, established by the NCCM, is part of a country-wide effort to provide girls in rural areas the opportunity to attend school. The schools use modern curriculum, versus the standard memorization used in many Egyptian schools and bring girls of different ages together in one classroom with the goal of reintegrating them into public secondary schools at age 14.

19. (SBU) The First Lady will also participate in an Embassy community meet-and-greet and an Embassy-hosted event for leading women involved in reform in Egypt. These women, representing a wide cross-section of society are involved in projects ranging from political reform to education.

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Alexandria sites  
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110. (SBU) In Alexandria the primary stop will be at the Library, known as the "Bibliotheca Alexandrina." The library's inspiration is the ancient library built by Ptolemy I in ancient Alexandria around 295 BC, which epitomized the intellectual splendor of the classical world. In the words of Mrs. Mubarak, the Bibliotheca "seeks nothing less than to recapture the spirit of the ancient library of Alexandria, center of knowledge and of ecumenism of the ancient world." Opened in 2002, after a 28-year effort, and at cost of USD 220 million--mostly donated by foreign governments--the building is an architectural and engineering marvel. It includes museums and galleries, research facilities and auditoria, as well as the largest reading room in the world, the size of New York's Grand Central Station. Director Ismail Serageldin, a former World Bank Vice President, has used the Library to host reform conferences including two on reform in the Arab world and seeks to foster its image as a "clearing house of progressive ideas." He has an ambitious agenda of projects but funding remains a key issue: although the library's shelves are designed to hold eight million volumes, they currently have only 350,000.

111. (SBU) The First Lady will also visit a secondary school which is part of the Egyptian Government's efforts to give local communities more power over education. This pilot school, part of a USAID-funded project, supports modern teaching methods and greater input from parents and community leaders into the education process, has the potential to serve as a model throughout the Arab World.

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Civil society issues facing Egypt  
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112. (SBU) Egypt claims a proud history of developing democratic institutions, such as an elected parliament (People's Assembly and Shura Council, although two-thirds of the latter's membership are appointed) and an independent judiciary. Yet, the public is becoming significantly more vocal about demands for more open governance. Recent street protests are departing from the traditional focus on disdain for U.S. policies in Israel or Iraq and rather energetically pointing to the need for domestic political reform. President Mubarak's decision to amend the constitution to allow for competitive presidential elections, which has been endorsed by the parliament and is on the agenda for a May 25 referendum, has met with a mix of praise and calls for more meaningful reform. The decision opens a new door in a nation which has never directly elected its leader. Opposition figures, however, point to "high hurdles" governing the process of registering candidates.

113. (SBU) The Egyptian government, in trying to strike a balance between demands for political reform and ensuring stability, has stated that it will not permit public demonstrations to turn violent; many would argue that the government is already too restrictive in regulating demonstrations. The government's perceived constraints on

opening the political process too quickly include concerns that religiously oriented groups, particularly the powerful Muslim Brotherhood (outlawed but partially tolerated), might take advantage of that process for their own purposes. The tension between public desire for more openness and the need for stability will continue to feature in the political dialogue in Cairo.

14. (SBU) Some specific benchmarks that the U.S. would welcome are revocation of the emergency law which has been in effect for decades, participation of international monitors in the upcoming elections (to help bestow international legitimacy on the process), expanded religious freedom for all faiths, and greater latitude for NGO's to actively foster civil society and promote broader participation in governance.

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Economic and regional context  
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15. (SBU) In spite of increased public interest in domestic politics this spring, the primary concern of most Egyptians continues to be their economic well being. Egypt's new Prime Minister, who assumed office last July and is visiting the U.S. May 14-20, has embarked on a series of economic reform measures that are designed to boost Egypt's prospects for a prosperous future. Ongoing reforms include changes in customs regulations and the corporate tax code, each require a concerted effort to fully implement here in Egypt. Business people hope that the long term benefits of these reforms will put Egypt on a stronger economic footing; Egypt is also hopeful that negotiations for a free trade agreement with the U.S. are on the near horizon. While working to improve the broad economic parameters which drive prosperity, the Egyptian government is also reluctant to reduce subsidies on basic commodities for its vast population; the people have come to expect a certain "boost" from the government and many will continue to judge the success of the regime on short-term pocketbook issues.

16. (SBU) The Palestinian issue is the major regional political issue influencing Egyptian thinking. Since President Sadat's courageous decision to visit Jerusalem in 1977, Egypt has been more engaged with both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than any other regional player. President Mubarak and his cabinet maintain an active dialogue with Israeli counterparts and look for practical ways to bring security to the Palestinian territories. In the public political psyche, the Palestinian issue is as much a domestic concern as a foreign policy issue - perceived grievances of the Palestinian population resonate deeply in Egypt and the Arab world.

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Educational concerns  
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17. (SBU) Education is an area in which Egypt faces the daunting task of preparing over 600,000 young people annually to enter the workforce. The sheer numbers of school children nearly overwhelm an education system that many Egyptians agree needs extensive modernization. Large portions of the national curriculum, despite recent efforts at modernization, remain woefully out of date and the public education system is plagued by drastic resource shortfalls, a serious capacity deficit in its teaching corps, overcrowded and dilapidated facilities, and pervasive corruption. Experts agree that this system leaves Egyptian graduates ill equipped to compete in the global marketplace. USAID's mission in Egypt contains a substantial program to address Egypt's educational needs. The First Lady will be visiting two schools assisted by USAID in a "pilot schools" program that aims to introduce an entirely new model for public education in Egypt.

18. (SBU) Egypt has a tradition of strong women in leadership positions that dates back to Pharonic times. The First Lady will be meeting with many of Egypt's most influential women, many of whom may suggest that Egypt's treatment of women is on par with more developed countries. However, international studies continue to document the serious challenges confronting Egyptian women, including credible estimates which put female illiteracy as high as 60 percent. Improvements in the delivery of quality education goes hand in hand with the development of a more robust role for women in Egypt's future.

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Impact of the visit  
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19. (SBU) The First Lady's visit to Egypt will reinforce U.S. support for the critical issues of education and literacy, will underline our commitment to the region, and will present a positive image of U.S. involvement in the Arab World. Mrs. Mubarak is looking forward to hosting the visit, and the Egyptian Press will devote considerable coverage to

the two-day visit.

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